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**Title:** Philippe Beck's art of poetry: the poems of *Opéradiques*

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**Abstract:** Contemporary French poet Philippe Beck through his intriguing poetic project *Opéradiques* (2014; which has yet to be translated into English) demonstrates a new understanding of writing poetry through the deconstructive, reconstructive, *boustrophedon* process. Beck finds the foundation of his art of poetry in the “ruins” of existing written poems, stories, texts of all genres and forms from which sprouts his poetry. When it seems that writing poetry has lost all direction, and almost become irrelevant, Beck's work shows us the “cracks in the wall”. Is it that his poetry should be received as a bold attempt to secure a new enthusiasm for the future, to form a stronger poem which will be able to say that which cannot be said? What does the poetic process in *Opéradiques* look like and what can it bring to the art of poetry? Does Beck's work tell us that poetry must be the answer to the question “what is poetry?” The works of Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and Jean-Luc Nancy, provide an opening through which to grasp Beck's poetics.

**Keywords:** Philippe Beck; *Opéradiques*; art of poetry; retelling; boustrophe

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# Philippe Beck's art of poetry: the poems of Opéradiques

Gorica Orsholits<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Contemporary French poet Philippe Beck through his intriguing poetic project *Opéradiques* (2014; which has yet to be translated into English) demonstrates a new understanding of writing poetry through the deconstructive, reconstructive, *boustrophedon* process. Beck finds the foundation of his art of poetry in the “ruins” of existing written poems, stories, texts of all genres and forms from which sprouts his poetry. When it seems that writing poetry has lost all direction, and almost become irrelevant, Beck’s work shows us the “cracks in the wall”. Is it that his poetry should be received as a bold attempt to secure a new enthusiasm for the future, to form a stronger poem which will be able to say that which cannot be said? What does the poetic process in *Opéradiques* look like and what can it bring to the art of poetry? Does Beck’s work tell us that poetry must be the answer to the question “what is poetry?” The works of Derrida, Walter Benjamin, and Jean-Luc Nancy, provide an opening through which to grasp Beck’s poetics.

**Keywords:** Philippe Beck; Opéradiques; art of poetry; retelling; boustrophe

Philippe Beck, contemporary French Poet, Derridean student, and *chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres*, in his exceptional opus *Opéradiques*<sup>2</sup> (which has yet to be translated into English), has accepted the fact that deconstruction of text is his reality, but also that the challenge, goal, and purpose of poetry today is no longer merely stating and describing this destruction. Rather, it is to make possible the reconstruction and new construction of parallel worlds of text resistant even to future new deluges doubting poetry’s existence. Through the movements that comprise *Opéradiques*, we will see how they provide an enormous potential for the new world emerging from the stories of this planet’s dwellers as told through the poetry

of songs as, in the words of Beck, “Songs are tales redone.”

In *Opéradiques* we will enjoy acts of singing, dancing, drama – where all of these parallel operatic processes do not disturb each other, do not cripple the quality of each other’s performance, and do not disrupt the duration and emotional power. There are different stories, too, from our past and from our future, deserving of the text and appearing in the form of a poem. In Derrida’s words: “A text is not a text unless it hides from the first glance, from the first comer, the law of its composition and the rules of its game.”<sup>3</sup> The Derridean school does not limit its criticism solely to modern European culture, but undertakes a deconstruction

<sup>1</sup> European Graduate School.

<sup>2</sup> Beck, Philippe, *Opéradiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 63.

of the fundamentals of the Western phono-, logo- and phallo-centric metaphysical philosophy, which dates back all the way to Plato. Unlike the popular version of philosophical post-modernism which joyfully proclaims the end of the Enlightenment project of rational search for truth, deconstructivists carefully read philosophical and other texts, and draw attention to aporetic moments previously sought to be ignored by magisterial exegesis. Insofar as it could be taken that the deconstructivists follow the critical spirit of the Enlightenment's thought even when they question it, in his work, Derrida proceeds to examine the concept or, better said, metaphor of light, in which the self-consciousness of philosophy, precisely in the Age of Enlightenment which took it as its emblem, reached its peak.

Derrida reads the tracks of the metaphysical, as well as the political violence of light, the terror of the theory that has remained blind for self-reflection and has mistreated Other. From Plato to phenomenology, according to Derrida, the scene is occupied by the philosophical heliopolitics of the nameless world of light that turns us towards "the intelligible sun, toward the truth"<sup>4</sup>. By examining the soliloquy of reason and a solitude of light within a tradition of the "oppression and the totalitarianism of the same"<sup>5</sup>, Derrida exposes that friendly conspiracy of light and power, of theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession, of seeing and knowing, of possessing and grasping: that characteristic exclusion of every unavailable other "in the oppressive and luminous identity of the same".<sup>6</sup> The heliological metaphor, according to Derrida, "only turns away our glance, providing an alibi for the

historical violence of light: a displacement of technico-political oppression in the direction of philosophical discourse."<sup>7</sup> Metaphors, however, do not exculpate, do not lift the weight of things and acts. Light transpires as a universal historical metaphor that no language can escape and from which one cannot be freed: "All languages combat within it, modifying only the same metaphor and choosing the best light".<sup>8</sup>

The poetry of Philippe Beck is not lost in the confusing turmoil of the imminent waves of the text's rejections and regressions of anti-Oedipus, anti-siren, anti-moral, anti-romantic trends and so on, but rather it wholeheartedly takes part in all of these new fluid processes, giving birth to the texts as songs in the space of poetic art. In *Opéradiques* we can again rethink Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Schaeffner's jazz, Zeami's flower, or Rimbaud's poetry. It is interesting, among other things, to interpret the concept of *new* in Beck's poetry. He does not create in the ether, does not build houses without foundations, does not discard and abandon what has already been made, written and told, but uses "rhythmic intellect" – *intellect rythmique*<sup>9</sup> – to liberate and open up the products of creation from the past, giving them a new form, colour, sound, movement – even a new vocabulary. Beck criticizes old misconceptions, introduces new forms of discursive consideration of poetry itself and, within it, new concepts of beauty, poetic form, lyrical language, freedom. Beck successfully places the deactivation of formalistic limits in poetic drama: an opera house full of historical figures, different tales of prejudice, false maps, petty bourgeois gossip, ugly and stupid outfits,

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 112.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, 113.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, 114.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida, 113.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida, 114.

<sup>9</sup> Beck, Philippe, *Opéradiques*, 11.

tedious singing, errors by a poorly practiced orchestra – all the way to the dull audience simplifying the already simplified operatic stories in their heads. And he turns this quasi-artistic institution into an organic body that has the air of a new kind of beauty of non-beauty, the impossible truths, methods of poetic expression itself, and the freedom of poetic creation where poetry can become what poetry truly is. The poetic and dramatic action of *Opéradiques* dares to transform degenerated structures with “mechanical/organic discourse.”<sup>10</sup>

By way of language through the poet's body, Beck operates, manually creating the future of potential poetics. But he has not done so out of his own courage or his personal desires, and not even out of the state of discontent with today's poetry, but from a need, a purely human need similar to those needs for basic survival elements – air, water, and food. A poetic need. The poetic need, not only for a personal opening, but for the opening of this world, of its cracks at least, as Beck sees in Rimbaud; the poetic need to breathe freely, unable to tear down walls, but able to create cracks, cracks through which we can breathe and begin to see the contours of liberated poetic writing. All of these strong feelings do not come from a formalist, naive desire for neatly arranged poetry, but rather from an enormous energy that simply thrusts the reader into a mode of being and poetry – poetry that returns to ordinary humanity, without the privileges of the exceptional, divine, other, and different, without the song and silence of sirens, without intended courage.

This kind of return-to-self art is also an art where the creator observes themselves while cre-

ating in the state of a selfless self, with the freedom of another, yet without another, in an open process of creating a cosmic space without the contemplated limitation of the meaningful. “I is another” wrote Rimbaud<sup>11</sup>: I, a poetic artist, a mere mortal, write without fear of the spiritual/formal singing that still drones in my ears as something old and remembered, as a tradition of ages past, not of my own memory, but more like a memory inherited from ancestors. I poetize, yet I am at the same time a reader, listener, viewer of my action – “singular/plural” in Nancy's sense<sup>12</sup> – with the combined elements producing a multifunctional *opéradique*. While I am creating, I am trying to preserve the feelings of imminent human weakness and the unscrupulous rules of the horrible state of common sense, as opposed to Valery who “cleaned” the space of the human and poetry in the name of beauty.

Philippe Beck is far from the classical notion of avant-garde poetry which is everywhere and nowhere, and everything and nothing, manically struggling to break free from itself, and as such becomes scattered and worthless in seeking freedom that most certainly is not in its void and rejected, to such extent that it does not exist. However, in my opinion, Philippe Beck can be considered the originator of a new avant-garde in poetry. “Poésie est ici ou là. Pas partout. Elle dépend d'une sortie.”<sup>13</sup> Beck successfully integrates the poetic into the art of poetry, to save poetry from its meaningless existence, from its unwillingness to recognize itself in this new poetless world, to save it from mass-marginalization, non-appreciation, and the sense of needlessness. The poetics in Beck's art of poetry were made by creating a

<sup>10</sup> Philippe Beck, *Contre Un Boileau: Un Art Poétique* (Paris: Fayard, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Beck, Philippe, *Opéradiques*, 18.

plural form that can open the cages of “*Panthère Formelle*”, regulate the production of the “formes-fleurs”<sup>14</sup>, and make a number of relational arts – “ils font un *Art Plusieurs*”<sup>15</sup>: “mimographe, cinématologie, musicage ou poëterie, poësie théâtrée”<sup>16</sup> – a grand opera with ballet, music, intellectual rhythm, but also with a reflection on formal institutional ruins, deviations – an opera ready for self-critique and restoration.

Such poetic power in the name of poetry’s survival is not to be dismissed as just another poetic project done in vain; it deserves all the attention as one of the real poetic openings towards the future in today’s severely tragic, still insufficiently articulated, unemancipated state of poetic creation which slowly leaves its familiar, cramped cocoon, and in its transformational mode, where it should either turn into a butterfly or be labeled as failed metamorphosis, become a plastic mass ready to be shaped. Is Philippe Beck not only attempting to comprehend this transformational character, but also to support it as such, as if creating cracks, in a manner of speaking, on this grey and rather ugly cocoon where the shape of a new butterfly is yet to be surmised? Even though we do not even know yet whether it is a butterfly, we still call it a butterfly, as we still imagine that only butterflies come out of cocoons. And this yearning of ours for a beautiful butterfly is still insufficient to open the poetic cocoon, still waiting for some new insight, vision, sensation, or modular transformation to create an opportunity for it to break and let loose some real/unreal butterflies that we have never seen before or even been able to imagine.

Voici une  
*Introduction à la Panthère Formelle.*  
 Forme est désirée en caverne transie  
 (ou hivernée),

la Chambre d'avant les Formes Fermées.  
 Elle dit quelque chose.<sup>17</sup>

“Here it is” – I might say – Beck’s story: story of poetry, of poetic growth in the jungles of linguistic creation, of a poetry self-extracted from a lemon, where the lemon, squashed and bent after its juice is gone, loses shape and form. A sour, slightly acerbic poetry, so real in one’s mouth and memorable for its not-so-sweet taste which can be diluted by water and forever lose its truthful not-so-sweet flavour. Sirens dilute the sour poetic juices with sea and ocean water, turning a poem into a little lyrical singsong. As is customary, in classical terms, here comes Orpheus who – playing his lyre so lovingly and diluting the tart lemon juice of poetry with wine – becomes lost in the labyrinths of the blindingly beautiful so as not to succumb to the diluted watery influence of those who seek power over language and thought. Thus I, aided by Beck’s story of the lemon, which is no longer in the form of a noun, but rather a verb (“Ou se citronne”), consider the possibility of self-extraction to counter the process of poetic dilution.

Writing about Beck’s poetry is very difficult using conventional methods of explaining or clarifying verses. Beck’s poetry is read and understood/misunderstood in some new spaces, which are unwilling to be available for explanations. His poetry is to be experienced and requires further re-examinations of the written word in some form of idea exchange by means of a dialogue (not with the author himself) but at the level of, I dare say, the intuitive and sensual. Beck’s strong attitude toward language and its use for poetic transformations induces a desire not only for flawless understanding and re-reading, but for creating new possibilities, new energy, in the very form and use of language (which today’s rather sterile,

<sup>14</sup> Beck, Philippe, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Beck, Philippe, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Beck, Philippe, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Beck, Philippe, 9.

apathetic quasi-poetry sorely needs) to waken in the reader a hunger not only to reflect on, but also to create a new story. The secret is, in fact, that to understand and read Beck's poetic stories one must intervene with a causal story of the reader with the help of furrows left by Beck's *boustrophedon* method.

The idea of *boustrophe* implies a *bœuf-taureau* (ox-bull). A boustrophedon (*boustrophédon*) is primarily a conditioned animal movement. It is the process of writing and reading, similar to oxen pulling a plow to the end of a field and returning in the opposite direction. *Boustrophe* is a mental operation, a process which is both poetic and stylistic, the principle of organization required in a real poem, involving a series of verses which create the vertical of sense; a vertical implies a horizon, the countdown for a new beginning and the confrontational appearance of lines aligned from top to bottom and from bottom to top. Reading is based on equalizing both directions.”<sup>18</sup>

The very activity of story-telling, of contemplating a new story, is not for the purpose of understanding poetry itself, but for the purpose of continuing the process of poetic operations, of opening towards poetic writing and thinking without being burdened by uniform, nicely constructed poetic stories that die in the beauty of our past stories. The process of reconstruction is without a beginning and an end – the poetry in present tense, one that works, builds, rewrites, reconstructs, deconstructs, chameleonizes the colours and sounds of the words it uses, considers language like a painter and like a musician, dancer, singer, actor, sculptor, architect, poet, writer, philosopher, critic, analyst... language in various roles of the texts with various possibilities, with unlimited potentials, forms and freedom necessary and vital not only in writing, but also in thinking about and reading poetry.

Le poème tacheté et charnu  
avec les *autres arts*?  
Tous bridés.  
Pour dire des ruines inverses.<sup>19</sup>

*Opéradiques* is a very bold endeavour into poetic creation – the art of poetry – just the one that we need in this time and this world trapped between epochs, incapable of reconstructing itself and accepting the incoming floods of new ideas, new levels of consciousness, new people with different communicative and perceptive states, and their new attitude towards nature and life in general.

Poetry does not deal in politics, but in criticism. The very meaning of its existence cannot be political, as poetry covers a much wider spectrum of reflection on external events through an internal process by means of language, unbound by the rational and political. For instance, Brecht's poetry, while attempting to be part of the political sphere, is actually critical and didactic. Even though the notion of political presently seeks to expand itself into many spheres of human activity – including art, education and philosophy – it still cannot replace or seize for itself the views of critical thought. Thus, Beck also enters the critical spheres of poetic creation even without – we can say this with certainty – any aesthetic and political activity.

Maintenant, les battues causent une « critique institutionnelle ». Et conversationnelle.  
Et des sites d'art spécifiques.  
La Fermé de l'époque va avec la Panthère Formelle,  
à préciser dramatiquement.  
Sur un plancher papier.  
Il est à ré-opérer  
avec doigté.<sup>20</sup>

The material side of Beck's creation advocates the idea of inseparability between the body

<sup>18</sup> Beck, *Contre Un Boileau: Un Art Poétique*, 155; translation mine.

<sup>19</sup> Beck, Philippe, *Opéradiques*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Beck, Philippe, 11.

and the spirit. The classical position of metaphysical philosophy regarding the body/spirit dichotomy has been the subject of deconstruction in contemporary philosophy. Nancy<sup>21</sup> in *Corpus* considers that making sense means touching, coming into contact. Every touch makes sense, every writing, speaking and creating is made by the body, that is, by touch. Writing is touching, touching is writing, the body touches by writing. Therefore, the body is what writing inscribes. Nancy introduces the term “ecotechnical” to explain the position of the world’s physical existence. “The ecotechnical functions with technical apparatuses, to which our every part is connected. But what it makes are our bodies, which it brings into the world and links to the system, thereby creating our bodies as more visible, more proliferating, more polymorphic, more compressed, more ‘amassed’ and ‘zoned’ than ever before.”<sup>22</sup> Bodies are always exposed through creation, and it is in this act of creation – in touching, writing, contact – where the body/spirit inseparability lies. The flute is played by fingers, and poetry is written by hand, claims Beck.

He also advocates the space of impersonality as necessary for poetic creation and thinks that “the ‘horror’ of the beautiful weak soul finds its answer in the ‘horrible work’ *begun in the imperson (l’impersonne) or the open subject: Confiteor de l’artiste* is a rough poem.”<sup>23</sup> A “rough poem” – a poem that possesses the characteristics of this world, that strives towards the natural property of existence without embellishment, as the property of reconstruction of “prose of this world” – is not for the purpose of beauty (though we can say it does not exclude it as such), but for the purpose of critical commentary, of reconsidering what has already been considered.

Re-telling and re-saying as an artistic form

dates back to ancient times. *Ekphrasis* is a term used by art historians to describe the practice of writing poetry in response to certain works of art. Although ekphrastic poetry historically mostly appeared in response to ‘silent’ art (that is to say, visual art), it has become quite common for ekphrasis to address works of literature and even events that have no fixed form or record. The ekphrastic poet is both a viewer and a narrator and is actually translating for us the meanings of the object of her or his observation. Thus Beck uses Ballard’s prose to ‘induce’ a new text, a new poem. This prose from Ballard induced a poem in *Opéradiques*, in which Smithson (“He”) is an *impresonnage* – an intensity of the opera of multiplicity<sup>24</sup>:

He sees the Island of Broken Glass  
grate of jewellery  
stretching from Vancouver to the rest of  
land  
It continues Calvino (the idea of crystal  
land)  
or Ballard inscribing the images  
of the multiplied orchid.  
Crystallographer is personalized?  
No. He is absenting himself from the re-  
flections of reflections.  
And furniture wrapped in glass  
cells and reflective portholes.  
Towards the glazed forest.  
*Scheerbartée*. In low definition.  
Visualism is separated. Without noise.  
Why?

Il voit l’Île de Verre Brisé,  
grille bijoutière  
étendue de Vancouver au reste de la terre.  
Il continue Calvino (idée de terre  
cristalline)  
ou Ballard inscrivant les images  
d’orchidée multipliée.  
Cristallographe est personnalisé ?  
Non. Il s’absente des reflets de reflets.  
Et de meubles gainés de verre,  
cellules et hublots miroitants.  
Vers la forêt vitrifiée.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> Nancy, 89.

<sup>23</sup> Beck, *Contre Un Boileau: Un Art Poétique*, 164; translation mine.

<sup>24</sup> Beck, Philippe, *Opéradiques*, 225; translation mine.

Scheerbartée. À basse définition.  
Visualisme est découpé. Sans bruit.  
Pourquoi ?

Why would anyone even mention copying and reproduction in the contexts of Beck's creation of the "art of poetry" – mechanical reproduction in particular? In my opinion, the entire process of reconstruction – retellings of different stories, of poetic and dramatic creations, musical and poetic opus in poetic form – is outlined precisely in Benjamin's reflection on the copied, which, even literally reproduced, brings something other than the original. According to Benjamin<sup>25</sup>,

[A] work of art has always been reproducible. Man-made artifacts could always be imitated by men. Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain. Mechanical reproduction of a work of art, however, represents something new. Historically, it advanced intermittently and in leaps at long intervals, but with accelerated intensity.

Still, Benjamin concludes, even a most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. In short, the space *taken* by a work of art collects its essential coordinates, plants its essence in the field of perception, and thus disrupts unfoundedness as the point of origin of the work of art. We associate perception with a spatial and temporal context as they cannot happen outside of them; we cannot perceive them here and now, in their firstness and solitude. The difference Beck makes is that he not only reproduces, but also intervenes into writing created in some other space and time, imbuing

it with a new power of survival of human texts, building new spaces, new re-writings, and new re-told stories to be re-read once more.

Like in every powerful poet, inspiration in Beck surges suddenly, in instants – in moments full of sensuous incandescence, when the artist's inner power feels the need to tear down the everyday, worn-out world, the one we see day in and day out. In such a single exceptional moment, everything in the poet's unconsciousness explodes in a completely new light and appears as a new structure, a new harmony of things and of phenomena, a new thought. Beck has shown us how to boldly enter that poetic jungle, and how to, on the "paper floor", dance and sing new poetic stories from those old ones that are beginning to be forgotten and lose their meaning. The feeling of enthusiasm and the involvement of all of us – humans, flora and fauna, minerals and crystals – wherever we are – from Vancouver to the island of Korčula in the Adriatic, from Ballard's stories to glazed forests – is the poetic legacy of Philippe Beck's *Opéradiques* which gave us an exceptional and unforgettable emotional/sensual experience.

And, in the end, I have also succumbed to the temptation to commentate and let my thoughts play with Beck's writing by writing my own poem; retelling Philippe Beck's story.

#### Rough Poem – Inspired by P.B.

Scents of practical life, documents, operations.

The poem can open, the poem can close – space and horizons – with its hands.

Flute in the kitchen, writing in the head and vice versa.

Stories are cooked somewhere else, before – they are looking for the door – in and out, but through the cage.

An image of Beck in the desert, talking dry-tongued to Rimbaud of nothing to come – but to be written again – an exercise of mind, double vision

<sup>25</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Continental Aesthetics: Romanticism to Postmodernism*, ed. Richard Kearney and David Rasmussen (Malden, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 166–81.

through the glass towards the jungle.  
Travel by lianas, vertical and horizontal –  
and repeat.

Don't go down, Panther is waiting for  
the poet – don't disturb the animal's  
singing – for the prosaic life of poems,  
in the rough re-fabric without flower  
motifs.

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